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A Suspicion Of Blackmail

Prisoner-swapping can be dangerous, Allen Dulles warned in the book he wrote after retiring as chief of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. The clouded case of the death in Russia of the American Newcomb Mott, recalls Dulles' warning.

Recently the Soviet government announced an official finding that Mott, found guilty in Russia of illegally entering the country, later committed suicide aboard a Russian prison train. The United States government has reserved judgment on the Russian finding. Mott's mother claims he must have been murdered.

No American official has made the charge, so far as we know, but it is impossible to overlook the possibility that the Russians killed Mott as an object lesson of what could happen if the United States refuses to trade prisoners with them.

The U.S. State Department has said Mott had expressed hope he could be exchanged for Igor A. Ivanov, a convicted Soviet spy facing a 20-year prison sentence in this country. But the United States refused to go along because, in the State Department's opinion, Mott was innocent of the Soviet charge of illegal entry and an exchange would only encourage the Communists to arrest other innocent tourists.

That peril was mentioned by Allen Dulles in his book, "The Craft of Intelligence," in connection with the celebrated exchange in 1962 in which the United States gave a convicted spy, Rudolf Abel, back to the Russians in trade for U2 pilot Francis Gary Powers and another American who was being held by the Soviets on spy charges.

Dulles said that as chief of the CIA he approved the Powers-Abel exchange, with misgivings, "under the particular circumstances of this rather unusual case." But, he warned, "If the idea of swapping agent for agent becomes the practice, the Soviet will be anxious to have a backlog of apprehended agents in their hands. Hence they will be tempted . . . to arrest casual visiting Westerners who have nothing whatever to do with intelligence."

Mott's case fits at least part of that warning: The Russians did not accuse him of spying, but only of crossing the border illegally from Norway.

Since Mott's death, the U.S. State Department has reversed its policy on visits of American tourists to Russia. Instead of encouraging the travel as one means of improving U.S.-Soviet relations, the department has begun warning passport applicants they may be harshly treated if they get into trouble in the Soviet Union.

It's an unfortunate turn in the up-and-down course of Soviet-American relations. One partial—though certainly not complete—remedy would be for the Senate to ratify the consular treaty which has been negotiated between the two governments. It would put U.S. diplomats in Russia in a somewhat stronger position to look after the interests of Americans arrested there.